

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee:

I write as a strong proponent of House Bill 6884. The various facets of this bill are meaningful, timely, and crucial. It is not hyperbole to suggest that, with passage, this will be a powerful, seminal act of legislation. It will be a part of your legacy in your service to our state. This is a tremendous opportunity, and a necessary step toward positively impacting one of the most important, foundational aspects of a functioning democracy. Connecticut has a chance to get it right.

Among other salient measures, House Bill 6884 recognizes the need to address the educator shortage in Connecticut and to ensure that we are striving to recruit and retain excellent educators. In doing so, it will generate momentum that will enhance the teaching profession in our state. Teachers and students will be better off for your efforts, and our educational system will be even stronger. There are few things more important to the well-being of a society. Whether it is a minimum teacher salary, Covid pension benefit enhancement, a teacher tax credit, play-based learning, or an educator bill of rights, among other features, anything we can do to support teachers and students, especially given our myriad social, economic, and political challenges, not only reflects the primacy of education, but of the ideals that we proclaim to uphold.

As the 2012 Connecticut Teacher of the Year, 2019 National Teacher Hall of Fame inductee, President of the Connecticut Teacher of the Year Council, and Social Studies teacher at Berlin High School for the past 25 years, I know firsthand the significance of not only recognizing and celebrating teaching excellence, but also the importance of teacher voice and advocacy. These are among the reasons why I submit this testimony, as well as why I believe that teachers need to be an inextricable part of the policy-making process. There is no one better positioned to provide insights from our classrooms and schools than teachers themselves. Our experiences and expertise are invaluable, and it would be wise for policymakers to prioritize and leverage our perspectives so as to inform initiatives geared toward providing the best educational experience possible for all students.

The process of selecting a Teacher of the Year is a challenging task, largely because Connecticut is fortunate to have so many excellent educators. The selection process, by its very nature, identifies individuals who are effective and powerful spokespeople for the profession. Teachers from a range of districts, grade levels, subject areas, demographic backgrounds, and years of experience, represent the broad scope of Connecticut's teaching corps. The Connecticut Teacher of the Year program, with backing from partners such as CEA, AFT, CABE, CAPSS, CAS, and CSDE, has been able to provide our Teachers of the Year with robust opportunities for professional growth in the areas of practice, policy, and advocacy. Teachers who have engaged in these activities have realized how important it is for teachers to be at the forefront of policy-making decisions and to make certain that our skills, knowledge, and wisdom are appreciated and utilized. Several educational entities throughout our state have benefited greatly from including teachers as part of their various decision-making

processes that affect teachers and students. It makes good sense to do so on a broader level.

For many recognized teachers, being named Teacher of the Year is the first among a series of endeavors that includes sharing of best practices, communications and advocacy training, statewide and national professional development opportunities, and other ways by which teacher leadership is strengthened. Consequently, teachers who have participated in the Teacher of the Year program not only represent teaching excellence, but also are examples of what happens when teachers are professionally valued and empowered. As one Teacher of the Year stated, "I am so thankful to have been given the opportunity this year to participate in many exciting professional development activities centered on teacher leadership....I have been inspired and invigorated. Through this experience, I have re-defined in my mind what it means to be a teacher leader." We hear sentiments like this time and again, as teachers realize how integral their role can be in the policy-making sphere. What we do validates teachers' professional efforts and affirms teachers' beliefs in the value of our work. As such, many of these teachers express a desire to remain involved in a manner that can have far-reaching effects on our profession. House Bill 6884 has this potential as well.

A Teacher Advisory Panel and representation on the State Board of Education are two ways by which we can honor teacher voice, solicit relevant and well-informed viewpoints, and incorporate meaningful and powerful ideas and strategies for the purposes of continuously improving teaching and learning. Teachers are the experts that should be looked to at the start of any policy-making process, and our real-world experiences and deeper understanding of the educational landscape can only serve to make implementation of policies more efficacious. Such a proactive approach would reflect the value we place on teachers' expertise, affirm the significance of teachers' input on shaping policy that impacts classrooms and schools, and ultimately, improve outcomes for all students. Unquestionably, House Bill 6884 will enrich the teaching profession in our state.

To reiterate, anything we can do to support teachers and students will result in positive outcomes. I imagine that, years from now, we will look back at this moment in the history of our state as a turning point for our schools, communities, and the states' educational environment at large. Passage of House Bill 6884 is critical for ensuring that teachers are supported, valued, trusted, and respected as the expert practitioners that we are, as effective spokespeople for public education, as vital players in the policy-making process, and as essential contributors to the functioning of a healthy democratic society.